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The American Public's View of Congress

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APPRAISING CONGRESSIONAL LEADERSHIP

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Abstract

Congress has long been unpopular with the American public, with approval numbers above fifty percent serving as the exception rather than the norm. In this essay we argue that such disapproval stems not from calculated reaction to policy outcomes or partisan attachments. Rather, people tend to disapprove of Congress for exactly the thing it was designed to be: an open and deliberative lawmaking body. The more Congress does its job, the more the public tends to disapprove.

KEYWORDS: Congress, public opinion

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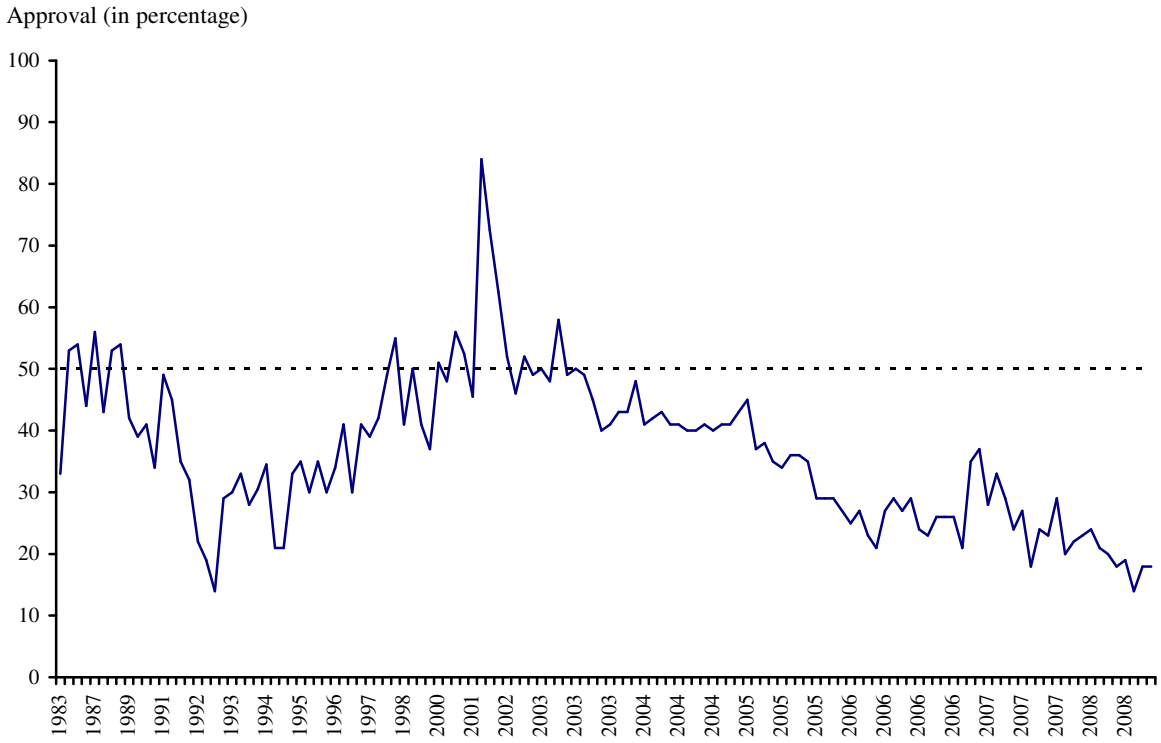
To say the least, Congress is currently in disrepute. As of the summer of 2008, poll numbers for "job approval" were remarkably low. According to a Harris Poll in August of 2008, just 18% of Americans had a "positive" view of the job Congress was doing, up from 13% in June. Such dismal confidence levels were reflected in other polls measuring job approval. In July of 2008, Gallup reported that just 14% of Americans approved of this job, fewer than the 18% who approved just two months earlier and setting a new record for the all-time low recorded by Gallup since it began tracking such data in 1974. In fact, since January of 2007, approval of Congress has exceeded the 30% mark on only three occasions, with the average rating for the first seven months of 2008 standing at just below 20%.

In order to provide a sense of the longer-term picture, Figure 1 graphs approval of Congress for all available measures in the last twenty-five years. Here can be seen relatively high approval levels in the mid-1980s during the so-called Reagan "feel-good era," followed by extremely low levels of approval in the early-1990s, a situation that contributed to Democrats being voted out of the majority in the House in 1994 after enjoying that status for decades. Even before the terrorist strikes of 9-11-01, approval of Congress was trending upward significantly, to around 50%. Yet the surge in pro-American feelings following those horrific events still had dramatic effects, sending congressional approval to unprecedented levels. These high levels could not be sustained, however, and, after immediately dropping back to the 50% range, a steady descent then began. This descent has culminated in the current record-low ratings described above. Taking these 25 years as a whole reveals that a majority of the people disapprove of Congress significantly more often than they approve of it. Those rare occasions when congressional approval rises above 50% tend to be short-lived, and the only time approval of Congress topped sixty percent was just after 9-11.

Congress is Unpopular Because It Doesn't Do What I Want It To

Ideologues on both the left and the right tend to interpret dissatisfaction with "the first branch" in self-serving ways. As of mid-2008, those on the right asserted that the public was upset with Congress's poor performance subsequent to the Democrats gaining control of both the House and the Senate in the midterm elections of 2006. They pointed out that the Democratic majority had delivered on few of its promises and more generally had been a do-nothing Congress, even as gas prices soared and the economy tanked. Democrats, the argument continued, occasionally passed legislation designed to embarrass the Bush Administration but were rarely able to enact any programmatic legislation over the President's veto. Numerous Democratic ideas faltered due to an inability to muster filibuster-

Figure 1: Approval of Congress, 1983-2008



Source: Gallup Poll, 1983-1988 and 1995-2008; National Election Studies (NES), 1984, 1986; Washington Post, various issues, 1988-1995
Note: Gallup data were available on a yearly basis between the years 1983 and 1988 with the exceptions of 1984 and 1986. For these two years we use NES data. Between 1989 and 2002 data were available on a quarterly basis, with the exceptions of the following quarters, 1989/4, 1990/2, 1990/3, 1991/1, 1991/3, 1992/3, 1992/4, 1994/2, 1995/2, 1996/4, 1999/4, 2000/2, and 2002/2. Data were available on a monthly basis from 2003-2008, with two polls measuring approval of Congress in the following months: November 2006, October 2007. Three polls measuring approval of Congress were conducted in October 2006.

proof majorities in the Senate. The implication was that if Congress wanted to make the country better and improve its standing with the American people in the process, it should get on board with the Bush Administration in its efforts to defeat terrorism abroad, to permit expanded offshore drilling, and to restore economic prosperity by protecting tax cuts. From the vantage point of the right, recent congressional activity has been both misguided and ineffective, so it should be no surprise that the public offers precious little praise for the institution.

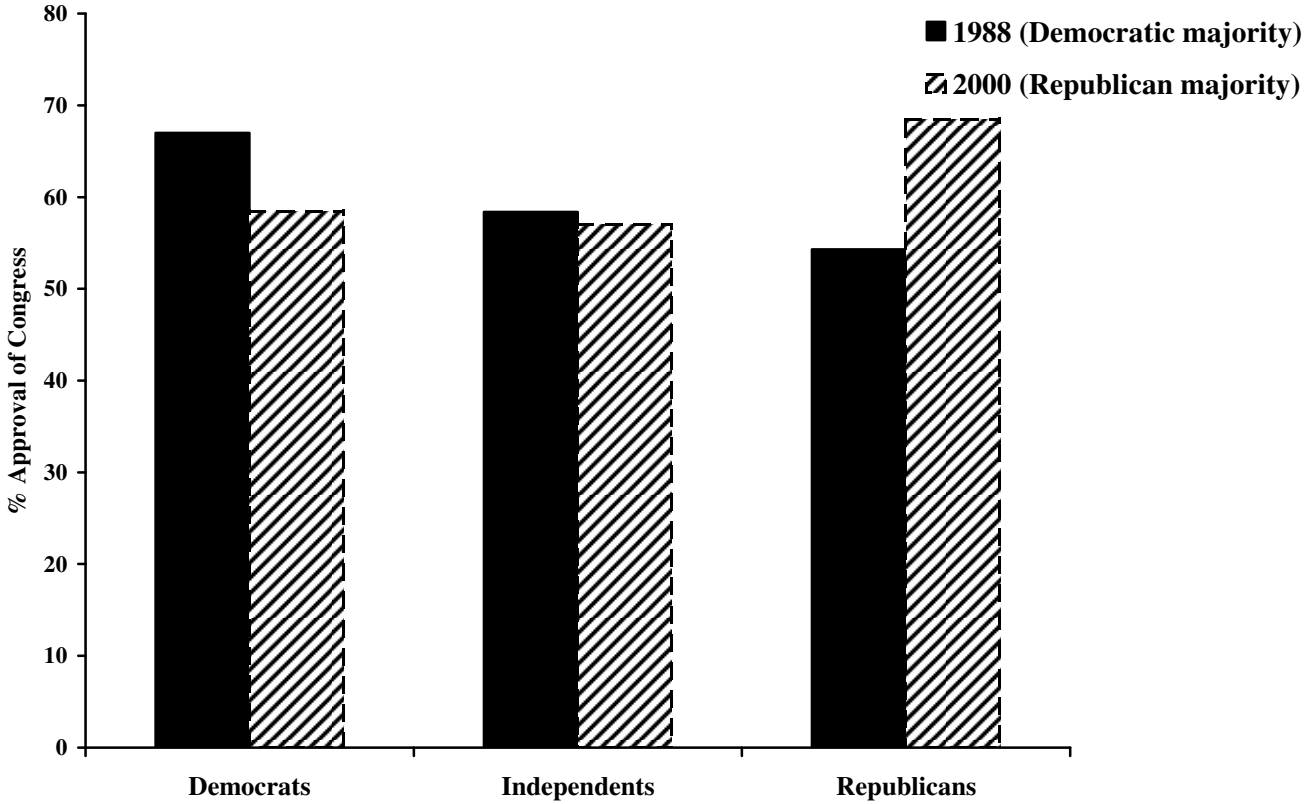
Those on the left agreed that Congress had been misguided and ineffective, but they had quite different visions of the policies and practices that were to blame. Their argument was not that Congress had been too eager to oppose President Bush, but rather that it had not been eager enough. Many liberals believed that Congress's low marks with the public stemmed from a lack of will to end an unpopular war in Iraq, to investigate wrongdoing within the Administration, to fund necessary domestic programs adequately, and to stop violations of First Amendment rights, perpetrated under the guise of protecting the people. The elections of 2006 should have been an indication to Congress and especially to leaders of the Democratic majority that the people wanted change from the quiescence of previous (Republican) congresses, in the face of Administration desires. According to this argument, it was the fact that Congress did not deliver these changes which frustrated the people and constituted the main reason for the abysmal popularity ratings of the institution.

It is tempting to interpret the cause of situations as somehow vindicating our own beliefs, even if those beliefs are in actuality quite remote from the situation itself. Thus it is possible to claim, for example, that Hurricane Katrina leveled portions of the Gulf Coast because of debauchery and permissiveness in American society generally and in New Orleans in particular. The theme of this essay is instead that when the right or left claim that Congress is unpopular because Congress is not "right" or "left" enough, it is engaging in erroneous attribution of essentially the same sort.

Congress and Partisanship

Perhaps because those who analyze Congress tend both to possess strong partisan inclinations and to spend their time around others with relatively intense opinions on the issues of the day, public evaluations are typically interpreted in overly partisan and policy-oriented terms. This is not to say that partisanship is irrelevant to evaluations of Congress; it most certainly is. But it is also relevant to fewer people than the political classes typically assume.

Figure 2: Partisanship and Congressional Approval



Source: National Election Studies (NES) for "Approval of Congress"

Consider the following comparison of a year with a Democratic majority in Congress (1988) and a year with a Republican majority (2000), portrayed in Figure 2. Survey data from the American National Election Studies indicate that Democrats were more supportive of Congress in 1988 when Democratic legislators constituted the majority in both houses, and that Republicans were more supportive of Congress in 2000 when Republican legislators constituted the majority. For example, 67.0% of Democrats approved of Congress when it was controlled by Democrats, and 58.5% did when it was controlled by Republicans. Republican respondents demonstrated the reverse pattern, with 68.5% approving when their party was in control and 54.3% approving when the Democrats were the majority party in 1988. Independent respondents stayed roughly constant from 1988 to 2000 in terms of their support for Congress.

The most surprising aspect of the figure is not that partisan support changes 10 or 12 percentage points simply on the basis of a switch in the majority party in Congress but that the degree of change is not greater. For many people in the U.S., evaluations of Congress rest heavily on its partisan contours, but a point that is often missed is that for many more people, this is just not the case. The bars in the graph do not change all that much from 1988 to 2000, suggesting that for large portions of the populace, partisan control does not determine their attitudes toward Congress. To obtain a better feel for this point, we can look more closely at the survey results generating Figure 2.

In 1988, 1,745 NES respondents categorized themselves as Republican, Independent, or Democratic and were asked the question on congressional approval. These individuals can be divided in the following way:

Independents	618
Partisans who neither approved nor disapproved of Congress	133
Democrats who disapproved of the Democratic Congress	181
Republicans who approved of the Democratic Congress	242
The remainder (those potentially influenced by partisanship)	571
Total	1,745

Those in the top two categories, 43% of the total, could not have based their approval on whether their own party affiliation matched the congressional majority, since they either had no partisan affiliation or could not give an answer to whether or not they approved of Congress. Moreover, Democrats disapproving of a Democratic Congress and Republicans approving of a Democratic Congress, a total of 24% of the sample is in these two categories, could not be said to have based their approval decision on partisanship, since they went against their own party. This leaves only 571 respondents, less than 33%, who may have had their approval ratings determined by partisanship—and even these individuals could

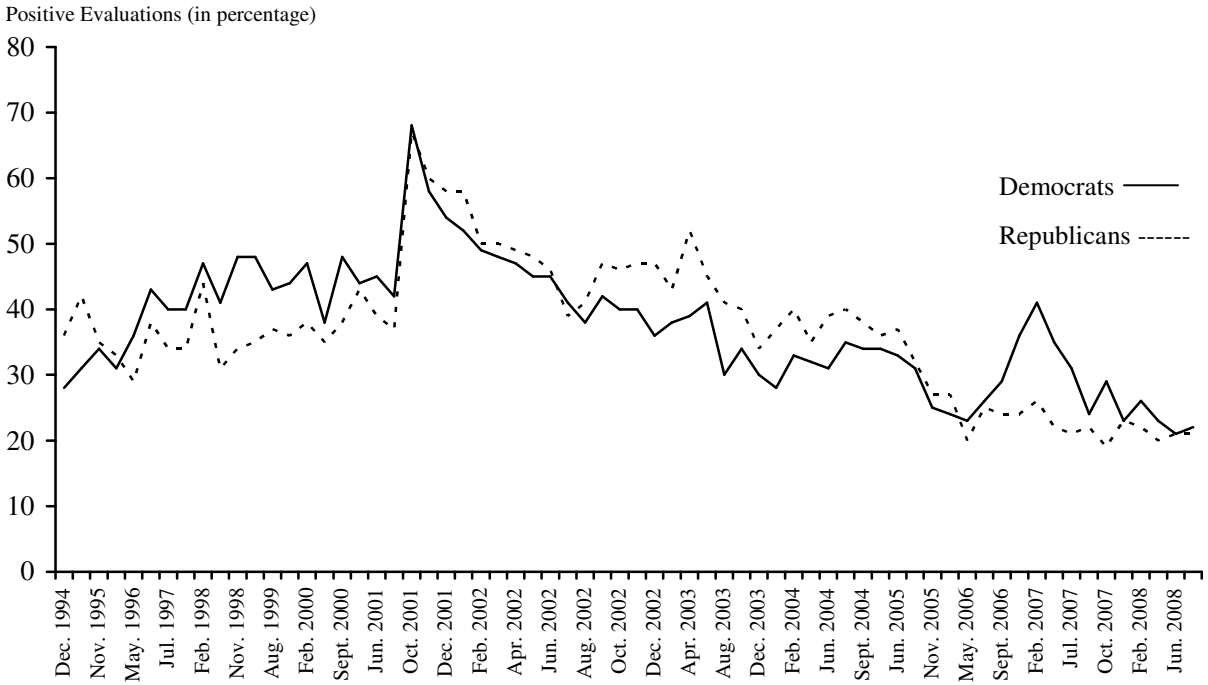
have based their rating on some other factor. The point is that, in 1988 at least, less than one-third of all respondents even have the potential to display a partisan bias in their response to the survey item on approval of Congress.

Is 1988 typical, or was it an unusually nonpartisan election year? Until more thorough investigations are conducted, we will only say that casual eyeballing of the survey marginals in various years suggests 1988 is not atypical. When a similar analysis is conducted of the 2000 NES results, the other year included in Figure 2, the percent of the usable sample that is composed of either Republicans approving of Congress or Democrats disapproving of Congress—remember, that Republicans held a small majority of seats in 2000—is just 28%, even lower than the 33% for 1988, despite the fact that 2000 was a hotly contested and incredibly close presidential election year.

If the goal is to understand the manner in which ordinary people are deciding whether they approve or disapprove of Congress, then, it would appear partisanship is not the answer for at least two out of three Americans. More recent data suggest the relationship between partisanship and congressional approval may be even more tenuous. According to a Gallup Poll from July of 2008, just 11% of self-identified Democrats approved of Congress, down 12% from the previous month, despite the fact that Democrats were in control of both chambers of Congress at the time. In fact, approval of Congress was higher for self-identified Republicans (19%) than for self-identified Democrats in the same poll.

Further evidence toward this point can be found in Figure 3. This figure takes advantage of the fact that, beginning in 1994 with the startling Republican takeover of Congress after decades as the minority party, several polling organizations introduced new items. Of most interest here is the fact that Harris began asking respondents to evaluate the job being done by the "Republicans in Congress" and also, in a distinct item, to evaluate the job being done by the "Democrats in Congress." These items are valuable in helping to tease out what people are thinking when they render global evaluations of "Congress." Do they see Congress in essentially partisan terms, in which case it might be expected that evaluations of Democrats would be inversely related to evaluations of Republicans, or do they see Congress in less partisan terms, in which case evaluations of Democrats in Congress and of Republicans in Congress would tend to move together? In other words, by asking distinct questions about each party, Harris makes it possible to see if public support for Congress is zero-sum, that is, if one party's demise in the eyes of the public is accompanied by the other party's rise. If, on the other hand, evaluations of the two parties in Congress move together, this would suggest that, however much they seem to disagree on policy matters, the two parties tend to share a common evaluative fate.

Figure 3: Evaluations of Parties in Congress, 1994-2008



Source : Harris Poll, various years

Note: Questions were posed in uneven intervals, only during the months listed on the horizontal axis

The data employed to create Figure 3 follow the Harris practice of not just asking respondents if they approve or disapprove but rather asking them to rate performance as excellent, pretty good, only fair, or poor. "Excellent" and "pretty good" are typically collapsed into positive judgments whereas "only fair" and "poor" responses are collapsed into negative assessments. The figure plots positive reactions from December of 1994 until August of 2008. As can be seen, the results render a fairly clear verdict, and it is in support of the "joined at the hip" rather than the "zero-sum" view of congressional evaluations. Evaluations of Democrats in Congress tend to move in tandem with evaluations of Republicans in Congress. Nowhere is this more evident than in the post 9-11 spike that dominates the figure. Evaluations of both "Democrats in Congress" and "Republicans in Congress" jumped from the 35-40% range prior to 9-11 to nearly 70% in October of 2001.

The further pattern of partisan advantage in these evaluations is interesting. Democrats usually were rated more favorably than Republicans prior to 9-11, when Democrats were in the minority, and Republicans enjoyed an advantage for several years after 9-11. Evaluations began a steady descent soon after 9-11, slightly less rapidly for the Republicans. Beginning in early 2006 and becoming sizable after the mid-term elections of 2006, evaluations of "Democrats in Congress" become more favorable than "Republicans in Congress." The pro-Democrat gap did not last long, however, and the main characteristic of the data in recent months has been markedly low evaluations of both parties. By August of 2008, positive ratings for Democrats and Republicans stood at 22 and 21%, respectively.

All in all, the differences in evaluations of the two parties are typically quite small and should not obfuscate the overall similarity of the two trend lines. More often than not, beliefs about the two major parties tend to move in conjunction, rather than in opposition, to one another. In fact, the correlation in evaluations of the two parties is a whopping .78. (Interestingly, overall approval of Congress and approval of the President also tend to move in tandem, even during periods of divided government.) Despite the assumptions by strong partisans, it is not the case that when evaluation of one of the major parties in Congress goes up, evaluation of the other major party goes down. For the most part, when it comes to evaluations of Congress, the parties are in it together. As evidence, consider the fact that the overall mean positive rating of each party differs by less than one half of one percentage point over the time period shown in Figure 3.

In sum, partisan affiliations influence a minority of the American population to think either more or less favorably of Congress, as a result of the party currently holding the majority of seats. Yet to think partisanship is the central issue explaining public evaluations is a decided mistake. Often, partisan swings balance each other out. Moreover, many people are either apolitical or are

reluctant to identify with a major party. A complete account of public attitudes toward Congress must look elsewhere, and when this is done, the findings are rather surprising.

Congress and Politics

One common (and sensible) suspicion is that evaluations of Congress will move up and down in conjunction with conditions in the country. If the economy is prospering and peace is at hand, the public should be more likely to render positive verdicts of government performance. Though such a pattern is evident for presidential popularity, this is not the case for congressional popularity. Economic conditions are sometimes strong when approval of Congress is weak (the mid-1990s, for example) and sometimes weak when approval is strong (2000-2002, for example). Societal conditions are certainly relevant, as is apparent in the aforementioned and dramatic spike in congressional approval after 9-11, but can we really say that conditions were good immediately after 9-11?

Perhaps it is not peace and prosperity that boost popularity, so much as the presence of an external threat. Indeed, evidence has been presented indicating the end of the Cold War produced a dip in public support for Congress. But the logic behind this finding would seem to predict a rise in congressional popularity with the emergence of the threat of terrorism. The current extremely low levels of public support for Congress, as well as the ephemeral nature of heightened public approval after 9-11, conspire against such explanations—unless people see the threat of terrorism as less immediate than the threat of Soviet aggression during the Cold War.

Just as partisanship is relevant to congressional approval but not as central as is typically averred, so too do societal conditions appear to be relevant but not central. High gas prices in the summer of 2008 exacerbated congressional unpopularity; they did not create it. But if all these characters play only supporting roles, who is playing the lead? Singling out one explanatory factor for a phenomenon as complex and multifaceted as public attitudes toward Congress is risky and potentially misleading. Yet there may be value in describing one factor that is often ignored: Congress's status as an open and permeable institution, in which politics is painfully visible for all to see.

People know remarkably little about Congress. Most cannot name their own representative—or the two senators from their state—without help. Questions about which party has the majority in each of the two houses of Congress are answered correctly at levels that exceed chance but not by much. Few people know the identity (or duties) of the Majority Leader of the Senate or the Speaker of the House. The committee system and internal rules of Congress (with the possible exception of the filibuster) are deep mysteries to the great majority of

Americans. As such, it makes little sense to assess people's feelings concerning the specific leaders or the other component parts of Congress.

Attempts to obtain separate assessments even of the House and the Senate are likely to produce non-attitudes rather than substantively meaningful responses. In April of 2007, the Pew Research Center released a report documenting the public's knowledge of Congress. While 76% of the public knew that Democrats held the majority in the U.S. House, only 15% could correctly identify Harry Reid, the Senate Majority Leader. On policy issues, the public struggled as well, with just 24% knowing that both houses of Congress had passed a minimum wage increase and the same percentage knowing that the Senate did not pass a resolution against the so-called "surge" policy for Iraq—both highly salient issues at the time of the survey.

Given this lack of public knowledge, it would be unwise to expect that variations in approval are traceable to internal legislative maneuverings of the sort that fascinate political scientists and journalists. Rather, appropriate explanations are going to have to be based on the realization that the public uses a broad brush to paint political scenes. As such, the public's evaluations are likely to be based less on the specific policies Congress has passed or failed to pass—the public simply does not know much about such matters, as was reflected in the famous survey hoax in which people readily passed judgment on a nonexistent "public affairs act"—and more on a general sense of the motivations and decorum of the members of Congress as a group.

Experimental evidence shows that people are less likely to approve of decisions if they know that the individuals making the decisions wanted to be in a position of authority or if it is believed the decisions were made for self-serving reasons, regardless of whether or not the specific decision was pleasing to experimental subjects—and it goes without saying that the public tends to perceive members of Congress as ambitious and self-serving. This situation is in stark contrast, for example, to public perceptions of the members of the Supreme Court, who are not believed to be either ambitious or self-serving.

Part of the explanation for the perception of members of Congress as ambitious and self-serving is undoubtedly the mechanisms for selecting members of Congress, including frequent elections, perpetual fundraising and campaigning, and numerous self-aggrandizing speeches. Another part, however, may spring from the transparency of the institution and the fact that each member is charged with representing a subset of American citizens and interests. A surprising number of survey respondents are turned off by political disagreements and the deliberate pace by which disagreements tend to be resolved. Deliberation is viewed by the public as bickering, compromise as selling out, and the separation of powers as gridlock. Supporting particular interest groups or political parties

rather than the country as a whole is believed to be evidence of self-serving goals rather than an appropriate way of achieving desirable objectives.

In this sense, Congress may be viewed unfavorably in part for performing the job assigned to it by the Constitution: representing and reconciling diverse interests from all across the country. People do not like disputes over policy issues, they do not like deliberative procedures, they do not like "special" interests, and they do not like ambitious decision-makers. All of these elements are at the core of Congress. Frequent elections force members to be ambitious, and the collegial nature of the institution invites policy disputes and a deliberate pace. It has been argued that the more Congress is doing its job, the more unpopular it is with the public. Systematic evidence for this contention was provided by a longitudinal analysis showing a statistically significant relationship between the extent to which Congress was in the news and a reduced level of public approval. This finding suggests that, while "do-nothing" congresses may be easy to vilify, on balance the legislative branch is more likely to secure approval if it is coasting rather than busily attempting to pass important legislation or to check presidential power.

Conclusion

None of this is to say that Congress is blameless or that dissatisfaction is entirely the result of a public that misunderstands the basic nature of democratic procedures. Congress brings plenty of problems on itself. Scandals hurt popularity, as does shrill and churlish behavior and blind partisanship. But it may well be the case that it is difficult for any large, collegial, transparent, lawmaking body in an incredibly diverse country facing serious challenges to endear itself to the people. Congress should strive to dignify debates, better address important public problems, and more appropriately police ethics violations among its own members, but the public needs to meet Congress halfway by developing a deeper appreciation for the extent to which citizens in the United States disagree on policy matters.

Recent evidence stresses the tendencies of people to live in cities and neighborhoods or even households in which residents hold political beliefs similar to their own. It is only natural that such sorting would encourage the perception that "everybody agrees with me" and that all the controversy in Congress is quite unnecessary. People are led to conclude that members of Congress must be arguing and disagreeing just because they want benefits from a special interest in order that they can continue to be reelected and draw remuneration both from hard-working taxpayers as well as from interest groups eager to reward their friends.

To bring this back to the current low levels of public support for Congress (18% approval in September 2008) and the explanations offered by the right and by the left, we are extremely dubious that Congress would regain the public trust by giving President Bush whatever he wanted in his last year in office just as we are extremely dubious that it would regain that trust if it forced, presumably over the President's veto, the immediate withdrawal of American troops from Iraq. In the abstract, people like the concept of a legislative branch that checks the power of the executive, particularly when the policies of the executive tend to be unpopular, as is the case as this is written. In fact, checking presidential power is the role of Congress typically most favored by the public, even more than bringing benefits back to the district/state. Yet this does not mean that people like it when the President and Congress are in the midst of a serious policy disagreement—and as Newt Gingrich found out when he and then-President Clinton were locked in a budget stalemate in 1996, Congress almost always ends up the public-relations loser in such situations.

Recent surveys indicate the public is nearly evenly divided between those desiring rapid withdrawal of troops from Iraq and those favoring a longer stay. In mid-July of 2008, a nationwide Washington Post-ABC News poll reported that 50% of the American public preferred a timetable for withdrawal from Iraq, while 49% opposed a timetable. A different item in the same survey revealed that 51% of the people believed the US was not "making sufficient progress toward restoring civil order in Iraq", while 46% believed the US was making sufficient progress. And 47% claimed to trust John McCain (and his "absolutely no timetable" approach) more "to handle the war in Iraq", while 45% trusted Barack Obama (and his "it is time for a phased withdrawal" approach) more when it comes to Iraq.

Given these virtually "down the middle" divisions of opinion among citizens on Iraq, Congress is in a no-win situation, and the American public is able to direct its ire at Congress even though the source of the problem is the public's own uncertainty over the proper course of action. In truth, as an institution designed to represent the views of the public, if Congress were not uncertain concerning the next steps in Iraq, it would not be doing its job. The angst over high gas prices is similar, with the public (and therefore Congress) vacillating wildly in perceptions of the attractiveness of various strategies for easing citizen suffering—or at least appearing to try. Congress is sometimes blamed for the fact that there is no easy and broadly supported solution to problems.

Congress is unpopular for many reasons, some self-inflicted but others emanating from the fact that we expect much from Congress, and reality seldom lives up to expectations. Specifically, we expect Congress to solve challenging public dilemmas with a minimum of fuss and blather, even though the range of political preferences among ordinary people guarantees that democratic decision-

making will be disputatious. Congress cannot elevate its status with the public merely by making wise policy decisions—whatever those may be. Instead, the best approach is for Congress to take steps to insure its decisions are truly "other-regarding" and for the people to recognize that policy disagreements are not necessarily indicators that Congress is failing to do its job.